

## **“A Mulching Primer”**

Mulch has been called the “silent gardener,” and that is a true statement. Properly done, the practice of mulching is beneficial in the garden and landscape. Some of the benefits include conservation of soil moisture, moderation of soil temperature extremes within the root zone and weed control.

First, let’s agree upon a definition of the word. A mulch is a layer of material that lies on the soil surface beneath and between plants. In Florida, we recommend a 2 to 3 inch layer of an organic mulch such as pine bark, leaves and pine needles. Although there are also inorganic mulches such as gravel and decorative rock, they don’t break down and provide humus and micronutrients to the soil like the organic products do.

An organic mulch should be coarse and undecomposed when applied to the soil surface. Materials like peat moss, compost and manures should not be used for mulch. These materials are soil amendments and are used to mix with the soil prior to planting. If used as mulch, these fine textured materials can actually have a detrimental effect on plants. They tend to mat together and shed water, block good air flow to the soil, and weeds will actually germinate and grow in them.

### **Common Mulching Questions**

 Are pine needles too acid to be used for mulch?

No, pine needles make excellent mulch. All organic mulches are slightly acid forming during the process of decomposition, but this should not prevent their use.

 Is it safe to use plastic film or fabric weed mats under mulch?

These act as barriers that can inhibit air and water exchange, as well as earthworm mobility. They can also be a significant problem on poorly drained or wet soils.

 Can crushed shell, stone or pebbles be used as mulch?

Yes, but be aware that oyster and other shell materials raise the soil’s pH as the material slowly dissolves and can cause problems to certain plants, especially the “acid lovers.” Rock, stone and pebbles do not contribute to the organic content of the soil, and they will reflect heat, increasing water needs of plants.

 Should organic mulch be replaced every year?

No, simply add enough fresh mulch over the top of the old in order to maintain the recommended 2 to 3 inch depth.

📩 Should mulch be piled up against the stems and trunks of plants?

No, mulch should not be allowed to lie against the stems. After each mulching, pull the material back a couple of inches away from the base of each plant in order to prevent crown rot. Citrus trees are particularly prone to rot from having mulch piled around their base.

📩 Can leaves alone be used as mulch?

Yes, but a better mulch can be made by mixing several kinds of leaves together. This alters the texture and provides for better air flow. Leaves of live oak or laurel oak, for example, are almost identical in size and, if used alone, are more prone to mat together and form a shingling effect. This can be easily remedied by adding some pine needles or other kinds of leaves.

📩 Will a good mulch prevent all kinds of weeds?

No, but it will prevent many of the species that germinate and grow from seed. Don't expect a mulch to stop vigorous, aggressive weeds like nutgrass or torpedograss. Other practices will be needed for control of these.

📩 Can mulches be used where grass is difficult to grow?

Yes, in fact in some cases, areas that are in deep shade can be managed by simply mulching and then allowing natural leaf fall to supplement. Under natural forest conditions, that is how it works. Under home landscape conditions you can create an almost maintenance free area - if such a naturalistic area is compatible with the rest of the landscape.

**Question of the Week:** I have seen a medium sized shrub growing in the area that I am not familiar with. It has reddish-bronze foliage and pink, lacy flowers.

Do you know what it is?

**Answer:** The plant that you have described is probably *Loropetalum*. It began being used in some local landscapes about 4 years ago. There is also a white flowered selection. Watch for an upcoming article concerning this shrub.